

A RESPONSE TO FFOZ's POSITION PAPER
"ONE LAW" AND THE MESSIANIC GENTILE

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In the summer 2009 issue of *Messiah Journal*, Boaz Michael and Daniel Lancaster have published the position that FFOZ (First Fruits of Zion) now takes on the question of Gentiles' obligation to Torah commandments.

Before I give my response to this article, I want to state that I know and respect both of these brothers. I have had them both as guest speakers at our congregation and as guests in my home. We have used FFOZ's "HaYesod" program and other FFOZ materials to introduce new people to the Messianic Movement. We sell FFOZ books at our outreach center. I appreciate all the good work that FFOZ has done over the years, so my response should not be misconstrued as an attack on either Boaz or Daniel.

I believe that both of these brothers have a deep and sincere love for the Lord and for the people in the Lord's Body, whether they are in the Messianic Movement or still in the Mainstream Church. These brothers are aware of serious problems that exist in the Messianic Movement, and they want to rectify those problems. I believe their motives and intentions are noble and pure. However, the solution they are suggesting will not solve the problems. It will only add to the problems. They state near the beginning of their article: "This paper is not meant to discourage or divide." But it has discouraged and divided people. Even before I received my copy in the mail, I started hearing reports of discouragement and division that have resulted from the publication of this paper.

As explained in the paper, FFOZ's view of Torah has transitioned and evolved over the years from "Divine Permission" (both Jewish and Gentile believers "had permission to keep the Torah but were not obligated to do so"), to "Divine Mandate" ("both Jews and Gentiles are obligated to keep the commandments of the Torah – not for salvation – but simply as a matter of covenantal obedience"), and now to "Divine Invitation" ("Jewish believers are obligated to keep the whole Torah," while Gentile believers merely "have an invitation to participate along with Israel in the aspects of Torah life which are specific to the Jewish people").

There are two serious problems embedded in just that last sentence. First, the phrase "along with Israel" implies that Gentile believers are not full members (or maybe not any kind of members) of the commonwealth of Israel. This is contrary to Ephesians 2, which clearly teaches that a Gentile who trusts in Israel's Messiah becomes a part of the commonwealth of Israel. Second, the phrase "the aspects of Torah life which are specific to the Jewish people" is a non-Biblical concept. Nowhere does the Bible single out certain Torah commandments and say that shoes particular commandments are obligatory "for Jews only." The commandments were given to all twelve tribes, not just to the tribe of Judah only.

It is true that certain commandments now practiced by Messianics (Sabbath, Feasts, dietary laws, tzitzit, etc.) are generally regarded by most people as “Jewish” commandments. But it is man, not God, who has labeled these particular commandments “Jewish”. The reason these things are now thought of as Jewish is because throughout the centuries Jews continued to practice them and Christians did not. Those who label these commandments “Jewish” are not basing their theology on the Bible. They are letting their theology be determined by events that took place in post-Apostolic history.

This false notion of certain commandments being obligatory for Jews only is repeated several times in the FFOZ article: “the Jewish aspects of the law” (p. 48); “the commandments which are generally regarded as specific signs for the Children of Israel (i.e., the Jewish people[sic])” (p.49); “aspects of the Torah which, along with circumcision, were generally regarded as incumbent upon the Jewish people but not upon Gentiles” (p. 54); “the aspects of Torah specifically associated with Jewish identity” (p. 54f); “specifically Jewish aspects of Torah” (p. 61); “a difference between Jews and Gentiles in regard to their obligation to certain aspects of Torah” (p. 61); “the aspects of Torah life which are specific to the Jewish people” (p. 68); “the Jewish distinctive of Torah” (p. 68); “distinctive Jewish aspects of Torah observance” (p. 68).

If you repeat something enough times (in the case of FFOZ’s article, 9 times that I found), some people will assume it is true. However, this idea that certain commandments are obligatory for Jews but optional for Gentile believers is a non-Biblical idea.

Like most Christians and Jews, FFOZ now says that Gentile believers are obligated to keep only “the moral and ethical statutes of Torah” (p. 49), “the moral imperatives and ethical authority of the Torah” (p. 53), “moral and ethical imperatives” (p. 53), “the moral and ethical components of Torah” (p. 55), “a basic moral and ethical standard” (p. 55), “moral imperatives (p. 61), “the full moral authority of the Torah” (p. 66), “the moral and ethical authority of the Torah” (p. 67).

Again, if you repeat something enough times (in this case, 8 times), some people will assume it is true. And once again, we see another non-Biblical concept presented here. The Bible does not label some commandments “moral” or “ethical” and other commandments “non-moral” or “non-ethical”. It is man, not God, who has categorized the commandments this way and assigned these arbitrary labels to them.

It is ironic that just a few short years ago, FFOZ published an excellent article in their *Ascend* magazine (Vol. 1 Issue 2) that debunked the idea that some commandments are moral and others are not. Here are just a few quotes from FFOZ’s article “The Threefold Division”.

“Not too long ago, a member of the First Fruits staff was invited to teach about the Torah at a fundamentalist Christian Bible school. During the question and answer period, one of the students stood up and asked, ‘How can we know if a particular law is moral, civil, or ceremonial? The Bible doesn’t seem to make any distinction.’ It was an excellent question, backed up by a very astute observation – *The Bible doesn’t make any distinction*. So let us make a bold statement. The distinction between moral, civil and ceremonial laws is artificial and arbitrary... If the two greatest commandments are moral, and the rest of Torah hangs from them, then all of Torah is moral in character. Therefore, all of the Torah carries

the moral authority of God... God has not drawn a line of distinction between ritual laws and ethical laws – but we fallen humans have.”

So now Boaz Michael and Daniel Lancaster have drawn a line of distinction between ritual laws and ethical laws – 9 times by saying that some commandments are “specifically Jewish aspects” and 8 times by saying that Gentiles are obligated to obey only “moral and ethical” commandments.

The UMJC (Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations) has long held this same view. Russel Resnick, General Secretary of the UMJC, stated this position in an article in *Messianic Jewish Life* in 200. Resnick’s basis for saying that Gentiles do not have to keep certain commandments (Sabbath, dietary laws, etc.) was because these commandments were addressed “to the children of Israel” and not to the Gentiles. However, *the entire Torah* was addressed specifically “to the children of Israel.” If Gentiles are exempt from obeying commandments that were given “to the children of Israel”, then why are Gentile believers not exempt from *all* of the commandments?

The commandments forbidding various forms of sexual perversion in Leviticus 18 are addressed specifically “unto the children of Israel” (vs. 2), yet Bible-believing Christians and Messianic Jews would not say that these commandments are optional for Gentile believers. Leviticus 19 is likewise addresses specifically “unto all the congregation of Israel” (vs. 2), yet Bible-believing Christians and Messianic Jews would say that Gentile believers are obligated to obey some of these commands.

If the UMJC (and now the FFOZ) position is correct, it raises a very serious question: If only the “moral and ethical” commandments are obligatory for Gentile believers, while the “non-moral” commandments are optional, how do we know which commandments are “moral”? Who gets to decide whether or not a commandment is moral, and what is the basis for making that decision? What is it about a commandment that makes it moral and binding, or non-moral and optional? To illustrate the impossibility of answering this question, consider some of the commandments listed in Leviticus 19 (paraphrased here to save space):

Reverence mother and father
keep My Sabbaths
no idols
not reap corners of field
not steal, deal falsely, or lie
not profane the name of God
not defraud neighbor
not curse the deaf or put stumbling block before the blind
no respecter of persons
not be a talebearer
not hate, avenge, or bear a grudge
not mingle cattle or seed
not wear linen-wool mixture
not eat blood

no occult activity
no marring the beard or hairline
no cuttings or tattoos
not prostitute thy daughter
honor the elderly

If you were to take a survey and ask 100 Christians and Messianic Jews which of these commands are moral and obligatory for Gentile believers, you would get conflicting answers. Obviously there would be agreement about many of them, but certainly not all of them. I know for a fact that Christians are divided over the question of tattoos.

Even if there were a 100% consensus of human opinion about which Torah commandments are moral, that would still not tell us how to *Biblically* determine whether or not a commandment is moral and obligatory for Gentile believers. To illustrate: FFOZ points out in their article that some rabbis taught that Gentiles are not obligated to honor their parents. FFOZ disagrees with the rabbis on this one, and considers the commandment to honor parents as a moral commandment (p. 49). But why? What makes this commandment moral? Perhaps the fact that it was engraved with the finger of God on the Tablets of the Law and is one of the Ten Commandments? Then what about the commandment immediately before it on the Tables of the Law, the commandment to keep the 7th-day Sabbath? Is the Sabbath not a moral commandment? FFOZ now says it is not, because they put the Sabbath into the “distinctive Jewish aspects of Torah observance,” along with festivals and dietary laws (p. 68).

It is one thing to be non-judgmental and patient toward Christians who profane the Sabbath out of ignorance. But it is another thing to say that the Sabbath is part of the “distinctive Jewish aspects of Torah observance,” after having told Gentile believers that they are not obligated to keep the “Jewish aspects” of Torah, that they are only “invited” to keep those aspects.

I don't condemn born-again Christians who break the Sabbath out of ignorance. As a born-again Christian, I broke the Sabbath for 17 years. But I wasn't doing it out of rebellion or defiance; I did it because I had been taught error. I believe the Father overlooked it and forgave me because He knew I didn't know any better. I believe He likewise forgives other born-again Christians who break the Sabbath out of ignorance, so I don't condemn them. Nonetheless, I do view the Sabbath as one of the “weightier matters of the Law.” Why? For a number of reasons. The Sabbath was the very first thing God sanctified (Gen. 2:3); it was engraved stone with the finger of God; it occupies a position on the Tablets of the Law (and makes up about one-third of the entire text on the Tablets!); Moses and the Prophets reiterated its importance over 100 times; God prescribed the death penalty for breaking it. FFOZ knows all this, yet they put it in the non-moral category, which, they say, Gentiles are not obligated to follow.

The FFOZ writers credit their spiritual mentor, Dr. Dwight Pryor, as being instrumental in changing their view from “Divine Mandate” to “Divine Invitation.” They quote Dr. Pryor telling them that the Apostles “never did” work out a theology “of how the Torah applies to Gentile believers,” that the Apostles “never did settle on a theology of Torah concerning Gentiles,” that FFOZ's “One Law” theology and conclusions “do not come from the apostles.”

With all due respect to Dr. Pryor, I disagree. First of all, we do not have a written record of everything the Apostles taught orally, so we cannot say for certain that they “never did” work out a theology of Torah for Gentiles. I believe they did, because I see it expressed in the Epistles. Secondly, if the “One Law” theology and conclusions are based on the Apostolic writings (as well as on Numbers 15:15-16), then the “One Law” theology and conclusions do come from the Apostles, via their writings.

According to the FFOZ writers, Dr. Pryor admits that the One-Law position may be “biblically formulated” but claims that it “did not arise from within the apostolic community.” Many Biblical truths were lost over the centuries and have had to be “biblically formulated” again by later generations. This does not mean that the Apostles did not believe and teach these Biblical truths. Dr. Pryor himself has helped re-formulate Biblical truths about Israel and the Jewish people.

The FFOZ writers mention several problems in the Messianic Movement, and these problems are real. However, as I was reading about the various problems, I was struck by the fact that most of these very same problems exist throughout Protestant Christianity, and not just in the Messianic Movement. The writers say that the Torah message “is not working well in the manner we have defined it, and if it isn’t working now, it won’t work in ten years, and it may vanish within twenty years.” Was the Protestant Reformation “working well” when it began in the 1500s? There were church splits, persecutions, beheadings, and burnings. Sure, there are church splits and division in the Messianic Movement, but at least we’re not beheading and burning one another at the stake yet. The Protestant Reformation did not vanish in ten or twenty years, and neither will the Messianic Movement.

The problems in the Messianic Movement are real, but FFOZ is putting the blame in the wrong place. They are blaming the One-Law message, but the message is not the cause of the problems. The cause of the problems is people who are immature, unstable, proud, arrogant and contentious. It’s not the message that has made them that way. They were already that way before they heard the Torah message. If they were not preaching the One-Law message in an arrogant, contentious manner, it would be some other message.

One thing that the writers define as a “problem” is the alleged “loss of Jewish identity” that the One-Law position causes, “because it fails to differentiate between Jewish and Gentile believers in their respective obligations.” Maybe I’m missing something, but to me, this is puzzling. I do not understand how Gentile believers obligated to keep the Sabbath causes any Jews to “lose their Jewish identity.” Gentiles keeping other Torah commands and having meetings on Sundays to worship God and sing psalms does not cause Jews to “lose their identity.” So how does changing the meeting day to Sabbath make Jews lose their identity? If anyone loses their identity, it’s the Gentile believers who leave their heathen identity behind and join themselves to Israel by becoming “a new creature in Christ.”

The FFOZ writers obviously have overlooked the fact that FFOZ does far more to blur the Jew-Gentile distinction than other Messianic do. Why do I say this? Because while FFOZ does not teach that Gentiles are *obligated* to keep the Torah, they do urge and encourage them to do so, *and to do it IN THE RABBINICAL MANNER*. Most Messianic Gentiles are not real concerned about Torah in the exact manner prescribed by the extra-Biblical traditions of the rabbis. FFOZ, on the other hand, strongly urges Gentile

believers to follow rabbinical traditions when doing Torah. Thus a group of FFOZ Gentile disciples, with their Hebrew siddurs, their covered heads, and their all-white tzitzit, resemble Jews (and thereby blur the distinction) far more than a group of *sola scriptura* Messianic Gentiles who are saying spontaneous prayers in English with uncovered heads and blue tzitzit. I'm not criticizing those who prefer the rabbinical approach. I'm just saying that Gentile believers who incorporate lots of Jewish tradition are blurring the Jew-Gentile distinction far more than those who use little or no Jewish traditions.

FFOZ based their former position of "Divine Mandate" partially on Numbers 15:15-16: "There shall be one statute for you and for the alien who sojourns with you, a perpetual statute throughout your generations; as you are, so shall the alien be before the LORD. There is to be one Torah and one ordinance for you and for the alien who sojourns with you."

FFOZ says that by the time of the Apostles, the Hebrew word *ger* ("alien") had come to mean something different, that "it had come to refer specifically to a Gentile who had gone through a full, legal conversion to become Jewish, i.e., a proselyte." FFOZ bases this statement (which I believe is correct) on the Septuagint's translation of *ger* into the Greek word *proselutos* ("proselyte"). Thus the "One-Law" commandment in Numbers 15 would now apply only to a Gentile who formally converts to Judaism. I am not opposed to using the Septuagint to help us understand how Jews of New Testament times understood certain words. In this case, though, the important question is *not* "What did *ger* mean to the translators of the Septuagint?" but rather "What did *ger* mean to Moses when God first gave this commandment to him?" There was not any formal conversion process for Gentiles at the time of Moses, so the commandment must be understood in the context in which it was given, not in the context of a semantic shift that occurred some 1500 years later. Even if one wants to understand the *ger*/alien of Numbers 15 as "proselyte," are not all Gentile believers proselytes? The word *proselyte* means a person who has converted from one faith (or from no faith) to another faith. In that sense, all born-again Christians are proselytes, because all born-again Christians are converted.

FFOZ also quotes a passage from the *Didache* which they believe gives Gentile believers the option of opting out of some Torah commands. FFOZ's interpretation of this *Didache* passage may or may not be accurate, but the more serious problem is that the *Didache* is not inspired, authoritative Scripture. We can read the *Didache* as a historical document, but we cannot say, as FFOZ does, that "This is clear and solid direction from the early communities of Yeshua." If it is not inspired, authoritative Holy Scripture, it is neither clean nor solid. And it may not even be from the early communities of Yeshua. Scholars are not in agreement about the origin or even about the date of this document.

FFOZ agrees with Dr. Pryor's assertion that the Apostles did not teach Gentile believers that they were obligated to observe all the commandments. Yet the FFOZ writers contradict themselves when they state this: When our Master commissioned his disciples to take the gospel to the nations, he instructed them to teach the Gentiles to 'observe all that I have commanded you' (Matthew 28:20). This instruction would include his commandment not to neglect even the smallest matters of Torah. (Emphasis mine) If this statement is true (and it is), then we can conclude that the Apostles *did* teach

Gentiles to observe all the commandments, and not just those which fallen man labeled as “moral” centuries after the Apostles.

According to the FFOZ writers, one major problem with the One-Law position is the fact that the New Testament teaches that Gentile believers do not need to be circumcised: “If Gentiles were under the same obligation to Torah as Jewish believers, then they should not have had an exemption from the commandment of circumcision... It is difficult to maintain a pure ‘One-Law’ theology and accept the epistles of Paul and his teachings regarding circumcision.”

I agree that it is difficult, but it is not impossible. It’s true that Gentile believers were (and are) exempt from this one commandment. However, it is of vital importance to consider the reason for that exemption. The reason the Apostles granted this exemption was because Cornelius and several other uncircumcised Gentiles (who, by the way, were already deeply involved in Jewish life as God-fearers) were filled with the Holy Spirit by a direct supernatural act of God. Because God gave His Holy Spirit to them in their uncircumcised state, the Apostles concluded that circumcision (which was understood as formal conversion to Judaism) was not a necessary prerequisite to accept them into the Messianic Community. The reason God chose to grant this exemption and to declare it by a supernatural act is His business. God did not explain his reason for exempting the Gentiles from circumcision, He simply declared the exemption. But where in the Bible did God ever perform a supernatural act for the express purpose of declaring Gentiles exempt from any other Torah commands? When and where did God perform a supernatural act that declared Gentiles’ exemption from the Sabbath or dietary laws? If FFOZ wants to say that Peter’s vision of unclean animals was a supernatural act that exempted Gentiles from the dietary laws, then Jewish believers must also be equally exempt, because the words “Rise, Peter; kill and eat” were spoken to a Jew, not to a Gentile.

The reason God decided to exempt the Gentiles from this one commandment of circumcision is not stated in the Bible. But the reason the Apostles decided to exempt the Gentiles was because God declared His decision by a direct supernatural act of His Spirit, complete with the outward manifestation of speaking in tongues. But the Bible mentions no other similar supernatural act of God that declared Gentiles exempt from the Sabbath, dietary laws, festivals, tzitzit, etc.

I admit that the circumcision question is somewhat puzzling. The only really puzzling thing about it, though, is that we do not know *why* God exempted Gentiles from circumcision, only that He did it. But we do know *why* the Apostles granted the exemption. It was because God had declared that exemption by a direct, supernatural act of His Holy Spirit that no one could deny.

I do not know all the answers to the question of circumcision, but I do know how NOT to answer the question. Using this exemption from this one commandment as a basis for teaching that Gentiles are exempt from several other commandments is NOT the way to answer the questions about circumcision. That approach sets people on a slippery slope. If exemption from circumcision can be expanded to mean exemption from other commandments that are “distinctively Jewish,” then a Gentile believer can justify breaking just about any Torah command he wants to. He can label the commandments that forbid sexual perversion as “distinctively Jewish,” and declare himself exempt from those

commandments. Ridiculous, you say? Why not? If FFOZ and the UMJC can label Sabbath, dietary laws, and other commandments as “distinctively Jewish” and non-moral, then why can’t a man label other commandments “distinctively Jewish” if he wants to? Since the Bible doesn’t state which commands are “distinctively Jewish,” he has as much right as FFOZ or the UMJC to decide which commandments are optional for Gentiles. I’m sure FFOZ does not want to see Gentiles go down this slippery slope that carries people away from Torah. I hope FFOZ will rethink their position and return to their One-Law “Divine Mandate” position.